

## Thoughts on Cinema: An Interview with Jia Zhang-ke<sup>1</sup> Cecília Mello<sup>2</sup>

Jia Zhang-ke is today one of cinema's most innovative and important directors. Hailing from Fenyang in Shanxi Province, mainland China, he moved to Beijing to be a film student in the 1990s, and since then he has directed several shorts and feature films that have significantly changed the history of Chinese cinema and left an indelible mark in world cinema history. Jia Zhang-ke's work springs from the articulation of an original aesthetics, which responds to the new historical and social conjuncture of intense transformation that has dominated his country since Deng Xiaoping's era of reforms in the late 1970s. In reply to this atmosphere of change, his films contain the tension between mobility and immobility, time and space, old and new, past and future, so typical of the seemingly contradictory realities of contemporary China.

His most recent film, *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian Zhu Ding* 天注定, 2013), delves deep into the issue of violence that has pervaded Chinese society in the past few decades. The director attempts to paint a picture of his country by depicting four different stories, set in four different regions, but which nevertheless develop as one through the film's sophisticated narrative style, indebted to Chinese literature. The following interview took place in Beijing in July 2013 during my stay at the Beijing Film Academy as a Visiting Fellow. At the time, *A Touch of Sin* had just won the Best Screenplay Award at the Cannes Film Festival, but a release date for China had not been secured yet. In November 2013, China's Central Propaganda Department issued a ban on media coverage of the film, and to this date it has not been released in the country. Today, it seems highly unlikely that it ever will. In the following interview, so generously given to me by director Jia Zhang-ke over the course of almost three hours at the offices of Xstream Pictures, he talks about his cinema and issues of space, architecture, memory, intermediality, realism, politics, censorship and nostalgia.

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**Cecília Mello:** Do you think that your cinema has a close relationship with other forms of art? What would be the aesthetic implications of this relationship?

**Jia Zhang-ke:** In order to answer this question I must refer to my personal experience, to my growing up years. During this time, I came into contact mostly with literature. As a little child, I did not have access to a lot of films, but I was in contact with Chinese classical literature, which provided me with a strong aesthetic sense and emotions. As to the visual aspect, I had a lot of access to traditional Chinese paintings, and these things combined exerted an influence in my work once I began to make films. Painting also has a relationship with literature, as well as with cinema. This also leads me to believe in the continuity between all of them. Take for example the idea of ‘poetic sense’. ‘Poetic sense’ means ‘poetic sense and picturesque scene’ in Chinese (诗情画意). Films can provide ‘poetic sense’ just like poems do in the field of literature. Of course, for me, this experience with Chinese literature would also come to influence my scriptwriting, or, in fact, it would influence how I choose to narrate my films. For example, the traditional Chinese literary work requires a narrative structure of “introduction, development, transition and conclusion” (起, 承, 转, 合). This is difficult to translate in English, but it shows the four steps of a narrative. This method exercised an invisible and formative influence on me, and I would even unknowingly follow this structure in the making of a film. Another example, this time of how painting has influenced me, relates to the notion of ‘empty space’. In Chinese landscape painting, this means leaving a blank area in the painting, open to people’s imagination. I think this is something that can be borrowed and referenced in cinema.

**Mello:** I suppose this is the case in your film *Still Life* (*San Xia Hao Ren*, 三峡好人, 2006), where there are moments in the narrative in which nothing seems to be happening, while in fact a lot is. Is this connected to the notion of ‘empty space’?

**Jia:** Yes, it is. Because I think it can help stimulate the imagination of the viewers, and this is something that is very important in a modern film, the ‘emptiness’ that is left by ‘empty space’. It needs to be filled in by the viewers’ own experiences, their own imagination. Thus, a very good interactive relationship is formed between the film and the viewers.

**Mello:** Does *Still Life* also share aesthetic qualities with Chinese scroll painting through its use of the tracking shot?

**Jia:** Yes, that is correct, in many ways *Still Life* resembles a scroll painting and unfolds like one.

**Mello:** As well as being related to the aesthetic notion of ‘empty space’ in Chinese traditional landscape painting, would you

say that your narrative style was also influenced by European post-war realist cinema?

**Jia:** What had a relatively big impact on me were the Italian neorealist films from the 1940s. I really like them a lot, particularly those of Vittorio De Sica. From a later period I also admire Robert Bresson. Cinema only has a history of about one hundred years, and this history is traceable. But it's hard to tell how influence works, because each film inherits the experience of all human culture and becomes a work of art, and film is also closely related with other forms of art.

**Mello:** Do you think there is such a thing as an Asian cinema aesthetic, starting from perhaps Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi? Do you feel like you belong to a lineage of Asian directors, or is this not important to you?

**Jia:** I find myself in a dilemma about how to answer this question. Because I feel that even though we tend to talk about a unique Asian aesthetics, especially represented by Yasujiro Ozu and Hou Hsiao-hsien, in fact this tradition also belongs to a world cinema tradition. I feel there is a similar aesthetic atmosphere in works by non-Asian directors. For example, I can feel something of Yasujiro Ozu in a film by De Sica, and I can sense the atmosphere of Hou Hsiao-hsien's films in Ozu. Besides, I'm a director who has been influenced by many other directors, and I don't limit myself particularly to the influence of Asian cinema. I personally like Yasujiro Ozu very much. People say he is the director who describes the family over and over again, and who understands the importance of family in the structure of Eastern society. For me, the films of Yasujiro Ozu portray a changing society, and facing this change was an important feature of his work. Recently I saw his film *The Only Son* (*Hitori musuko*, 1936), and it left a big impression on me... At the same time, I don't think there is a European cinema tradition. I think that when I started to study cinema in 1993, I was faced with one tradition, that is, one hundred years of film history. In cinema I don't think there are different regions, and we need to face and accept the idea of a single tradition.

**Mello:** Could you comment on the issue of realism in your cinema?

**Jia:** I have always placed a lot of emphasis on realism since my first short film *Xiao Shan Going Home* (*Xiao Shan Hui Jia* 小山回家), from 1995. I think this is connected with the problem of cultural heritage, which I also have to face. As you know, since the liberation in 1949, Chinese culture was transformed into Revolutionary Literature, Revolutionary Art. These works, produced under the banner of the Revolution, actually are problematic with regard to the issue of truth. In other words, real characters and the true fate of Chinese people cannot be seen in these works. After the 1980s and the 1990s,

truth has become a very strong aspiration in Chinese art, and that is because we trust in the power to be able to film and to tell what is really happening in China. So I strongly aspired to realism since I started making films in the 1990s. It was also a sort of rebelling against Chinese culture from the past, which rarely reflected reality. It is the minimum amount of creative dignity pursued by film directors in China today, this desire to talk about real life.

**Mello:** Still on the issue of realism, in your book *Jiaxiang*<sup>3</sup> you write that ‘the real in cinema is an aesthetic real’ (2009, p. 243). What did you mean by this?

**Jia:** I am particularly fond of the documentary style. Because I consider it to be the most prominent aesthetic aspect of cinema in general: the so-called recovery of material reality. That is why, after the invention of photography, there was a desire to invent films, to make those images come alive. It was mankind’s desire to replicate natural human life. In my case, the first time I saw a film I thought that the most beautiful aspect of it was how natural a man looked when projected on the screen. This was the most immediate feeling that moving images produced in me, and I was touched in a very direct way. I have always wanted to capture this feeling, for this is the kind of cinema that I appreciate. That is why I always wish to have the characters on screen look natural, to talk and walk in a natural way. This is the kind of aesthetic feeling that I enjoy.

**Mello:** You have often said that cinema is essentially an art of time. But your films are also very concerned with space. Firstly, there is the question of travelling across different parts of China. Is this important to your art? Does travelling inspire you?

**Jia:** I put a lot of emphasis on space in the creation of my films. In fact, I have a work habit: first I have an idea for a new film, and then I go travelling. From my initial idea I will first think about possible places to shoot the film, and then I will start travelling, looking for sceneries that move me. During this process, I begin to write the script. So, for me, the creation of an image of space is as important as the creation of an image of a character. They appear in my mind almost at the same time. Take for instance my new film, *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian Zhu Ding* 天注定, 2013). When I was thinking about the film, I knew I was going to shoot four characters: one in Shanxi, one in Chongqing, one in Shennongjia, near Wuhan, Hubei province and one in Guangdong. I bore this idea and then I started traveling. I travelled from Chongqing to Hubei, from Hubei to Shanxi, and from Shanxi to Guangdong. I finished writing the script after the trip was over. This is part of my personality. I strongly rely on traveling to come into contact with an unfamiliar environment, with an unfamiliar space; this enables me to imagine and to visualize. So, on one

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<sup>3</sup> This book was translated into French as *Dits et écrits d’un cinéaste chinois*, Paris: Capricci, 2012.

hand, I think there is a sense of mobility in my films. In fact, Chinese people are now migrating, especially the farm workers. They migrate from the countryside to the south, from west to east; the whole of China is in the process of migration. Mobility is thus part of China's reality. On the other hand, China is confronted with many serious social problems; for example, the imbalance of regional developments, the differences between different areas of the country, such as, for instance, between the urban areas and the rural areas, between the east and the west. The urban areas have many resources and appear much more modern while the rural area look as in decline. The economic development in the east is flourishing while in the west it is still primitive. These huge differences exist in China, and I've always wished to portray this in my films.

**Mello:** You have talked about the importance of cinema as a container of memory. Would you agree that memory is mostly contained in space, and that the transformation of space can destroy memory?

**Jia:** Certainly. I remember that, when I was filming *Xiao Wu* (小武) in 1997, I was shocked by the fact that my hometown, which has a centuries' long history, was going to be partly demolished. It was the first time in my life that I was confronted with the problem of memory being deleted. I knew every corner of every street in the city; I grew up there. After so much of it disappeared, I thought that there would be no place for me to look for my memories. I thought I would face a great crisis. From 1997 until now China has been in the process of demolition, and I feel like my memories are being erased with it. Old cinemas have also been disappearing. Seeing films on the big screen produced a strong memory, especially when entertainment options were so rare and material life was so limited. The cinema experience could even be compared to the experience of growing up. Through cinema we could see the life of others, we could see the outside world. Cinema is a place where we can learn about things and have many life experiences, where many things may happen, including love and conflicts, and so our memories are contained inside the cinemas. Therefore the demolition of cinemas is a huge problem. In my hometown, all the old cinemas are now gone. The point is that when we watch a film together in the cinema, we actually have some kind of public memory or collective memory. Because, when many of us watch the film together, we later talk about it together, we cry together and we sigh together. In this way a public memory is formed between us, an understanding, an impression. Now things have changed. We often watch films alone. Thus, the idea of public memory is fading; because watching films has turned into an individual memory.

**Mello:** In relation to this loss of memory and the transformations in China today, how do you think your cinema relates to History?

**Jia:** When I'm conceiving and directing a film, I think that society and its issues are my main concern. I am concerned with how society is developing, changing. Then again, I will also consider the issue from a historical perspective. I am concerned with what my life in the present means to the past, and what it means to the future, and what the present means within the whole historical process of China. Because I think a director should always consider problems from a historical perspective, as well as from the point of view of society and from an aesthetic angle. This is what I call a qualified creative process. Because if we forget the historical angle, we won't really know the things we are describing today; what is happening today; we might even go as far as to say that we will not know a thing.

**Mello:** Why did you choose to film *Cry Me a River* (*Heshang de Aiqing* 河上的爱情, 2008) in Suzhou?

**Jia:** Because I particularly wanted to talk about the passage of time in that film. The four characters have known each other since college, and their lives have changed a lot after graduation. I think that the question of time is something really amazing, but it is also something really cruel. So, in the film I also tackle the issue of aging. They have all grown older and older, and this becomes a problem. I wanted to express the concept of time, so I thought about the river; and that happened because in Chinese culture, the flow of the river is a symbol of time. Being on the river, on a boat, shows a sense of passivity. The boat moves because of the flow of the river's water. There is a sense of sorrow in this, in that you have no way to change things; you can only move along with the water, and along the course of the river.

**Mello:** The train scene in *Platform* (*Zhan Tai* 站台, 2000) was inspired by your personal memories growing up in Fenyang. Was it perhaps also an homage to Indian director Satyajit Ray and the famous train scene in *Pather Panchali* (1955)?

**Jia:** Not really. This scene was inspired by a very memorable personal experience. But, at the same time, I think there are many people who felt the same way, or who had a similar experience, because we were all faced with poverty. This does not mean necessarily that everyone is the same, or that it is the same generation, but people can feel the same way, people who had a similar experience with poverty and with modernization, and who faced similar problems. Because the train, to many people, means modernization, travelling, being able to reach faraway places, and freedom. So I think the train is an important aesthetic symbol in art.

**Mello:** You use a lot of pop music in your films, especially in *Platform*. In this film it often changes from the point of view of the individual (diegetic music) to a general point of view (non-diegetic

music). Would this be related to the individual-collective equation that pervades the film?

**Jia:** In *Platform* there are many gatherings where young people enjoy themselves and listen to music. Just like people watching films together in the cinema, pop music has become our public memory from the 1980s. Public memory has a private aspect as well as a public aspect; it is the trace of people living together. So, I think that not only does this memory belong to each character in the film, and to all the characters collectively, but it also belongs to the public. One person's film always becomes everybody's film. Above all, I must emphasize that these memories are public memories. In *Platform*, a group of young people belong to a performing troupe that takes music to more backward and poor places. I think this kind of itinerant performances helped to spread a new way of life and a new culture to people who had no access to it. By the same token, these artists enjoyed listening to new music on the radio, which brought a new culture into their lives. I have a lot of respect for the itinerant artists, because they brought a new message and a new kind of music to humbler places. Chinese society is divided into many social ranks, and it has been developing into the shape of a pyramid. So there are many poor people in remote regions who cannot enjoy the benefits of modernization. The itinerant performers bring new music to them and to these places. I find this very touching.

**Mello:** Is it correct to say that in *Platform* there is a contrast between the loudspeaker, a device that delivers messages to the whole town in an official mode, and the tape recorder, which provides a more introspective form of listening? Was this transition from loudspeaker to tape recorder something that you experienced in the 1980s?

**Jia:** Yes, the two are related. Growing up in my hometown, which is a small city, the streets were full of these loudspeakers. What came out of the loudspeakers was basically the official voice. If we wanted to listen to some private or more personal sounds we had to secretly listen to Taiwanese radio stations, which played pop music. At that time, this was a very risky thing to do. But we could obtain new music and new culture through these things, including tape recorders, generally smuggled from outside China.

**Mello:** Why did you choose to film parts of *Platform* in the city of Pingyao?

**Jia:** Just as I have mentioned, in China there are big differences between the urban areas and the rural areas. My hometown is Fenyang, in Shanxi Province. I grew up there and left at the age of 23. The idea of making films came to me when I was still in my hometown. Why did I have the idea of making films? Because I seldomly saw Chinese films that showed reality, that showed the everyday life in places such as Fenyang and Pingyao. When I had the

chance to make my own films I naturally thought about going back to my hometown, to shoot a film there, hoping to bring an alternative form of filmmaking into the Chinese cinema landscape. Because in China at the time you could probably only watch two kinds of films in the cinema: one was commercial films, in which the story usually happens in cities, and the other was propaganda films (主旋律电影). This kind of film promotes the policies of the government, its mainstream ideology, and has nothing to do with real life. I felt that my life was not visible in these two kinds of films, so I decided to make films which could reflect it.

**Mello:** I see, but the question is why did you shoot parts of the film in Pingyao and not in Fenyang, which is your hometown? Was it because of the city walls in Pingyao?

**Jia:** Oh, I see. It is because Fenyang actually used to be like Pingyao, a walled city. When I was about eight or nine years old, they started to knock down the walls, and soon they disappeared completely. *Platform* shows how a group of young people live a confined life, how their lives are limited to one place, so I think that the wall allows the viewers to understand that they are living in confinement, moved by a desire to leave, to travel. When I decided to make this film, Fenyang had no walls left and so I went to Pingyao. The two cities are very close.

**Mello:** By choosing the song 'Genghis Khan' by George Lam in *Platform* were you consciously making a comment on the breaching of walls during the 1980s, by evoking a Mongolian invader?

**Jia:** I think the most important thing is that it was the first disco song I ever heard. Before that, there used to be no pop music in China. Then it was gradually introduced in the early 1980s. At first, we listened to music by Deng Lijun (Teresa Teng). Teresa Teng's music was lyrical and slow and she sang mainly about love. After Teresa Teng came George Lam's 'Genghis Khan', which was the earliest disco music for young people in China. So it represented a different rhythm and it became part of the memory of our generation. We were born in the 1970s and the first 'breakdance' (霹雳舞) most of us did was to this song 'Genghis Khan'. In fact, there were two songs: 'Genghis Khan' and 'Ali Baba'. We believed that 'Ali Baba' was for disco dancing, but later we also used it for breakdancing. It appeared at the same time as 'Genghis Khan'. But I think I chose to use 'Genghis Khan' because of the importance of Mongolia. There is a scene in which the three friends talk about Mongolia, about Ulan Bator. I lived in Shanxi and during the winter there would always be cold currents from Mongolia. As a kid, when I listened to the weather forecast, they always mentioned Mongolia. So for me Mongolia was a very mysterious and distant place, and it is the same for the characters in the film. So I think I chose 'Genghis Khan' instead of 'Ali Baba' because it is related with Mongolia, this very distant land.



**Mello:** That is really interesting. In *The World* (*Shi Jie* 世界, 2004) there is another pop song referencing Mongolia, called ‘Night of Ulan Bator’. Who sings it in the Chinese version of the film?

**Jia:** It was sung by Zhao Tao, especially for the film.

**Mello:** I see... Still thinking of walls, they seem to be prominent in your films, and in *The World* one of the most powerful scenes is that of Erguniang's death and his final note being transferred to the hospital's wall. Could you comment on the importance of walls in your films?

**Jia:** China is a country of many walls. As you know, the country is divided in two by the Great Wall: there is an inner part, south of the Great Wall, and an outer part, north of the Great Wall. Then many Chinese cities like Fenyang and Pingyao have walls surrounding them. And each family has a courtyard also surrounded by walls, so we live in spaces surrounded by many walls. When I was a small child, there were still a lot of traditional buildings in the city, so I really felt like we were always surrounded by walls. In 1979, with the beginning of the Chinese Economic Reform (改革开放), the first thing I saw in my hometown was the demolition of the city walls! So for me, the wall has always meant constraint and control, a sense of immobility in a society where people are bound up by walls and are not allowed to move freely. I may be particularly sensitive to ‘walls’. On the other hand, in my films you can always find green walls. This is because in my childhood, in the end of 1970s, you could find these walls in all Chinese institutions, and as I was quite short they were all I could see from my height. For me, the green wall means ‘the system’. We used to live under a ‘planned economy’, and so these walls are the traces of the country's old system which remains. Nowadays there are still many places like this. Green is the colour of institutions such as schools, hospitals and offices. Some people also enjoyed painting the walls in their homes half green. So, for me, it is the colour that represents the end of 1970s and the 1980s. Later on, it becomes less and less common, but of course it still exists.

**Mello:** That is really fascinating... but why green?

**Jia:** The Chinese are fond of green. As you know, the most traditional landscape painting (mountain-water painting, 山水画) style in China is called ‘blue-green painting’ (青绿山水). China is an agricultural country and green represents vegetation. Nature is mainly green, the green of the grass and the trees, so I think that is why people like green.

**Mello:** In relation to *The World* and to the eponymous park in which it was filmed, what did you mean exactly when you wrote that

‘enjoying the fruits of the whole world will not solve the problem of jet lag brought about by our own history’ (Jia, 2009, p. 147).<sup>4</sup>

**Jia:** I will give you an example of what I believe to be the ‘time difference’ or ‘jet lag’. Take China, for instance: in what concerns its material development, it can be listed within the ranks of globalized and modernized nations. Judging from a material point of view, it may be considered a modern society. But our system is probably still lagging behind. Individuals have not yet acquired a modern spirit and a modern consciousness. This is the lag. We may be able to keep up the pace with the world from a material point of view. But the consciousness of the whole society, for example, the consciousness of freedom and the consciousness of equality between men and women, that is probably still lagging behind. It is as if the hardware of the society has reached modernity but the software is still lagging in the past. Recently, I have been more concerned with the issue of modernization. Human thought is also subject to modernization, and this is something lagging behind among the Chinese people.

**Mello:** Your new film *A Touch of Sin* has references to the *wuxia* genre in Chinese/Hong Kong/Taiwan cinema, as well as to Chinese opera. Why did you choose to bring these elements into your film?

**Jia:** In fact, the most important influences are the traditional Chinese *Wuxia* literature and *Wuxia* films, including the classical novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* and the films by King Hu. Moreover, in the film there are several segments of traditional opera, which were used to reveal the similarity between the fate of ancient people and the fate of modern people, and to show that perhaps China hasn’t really changed all that much.

**Mello:** And why did you decide to tackle the issue of violence in this film?

**Jia:** I think the problem of violence has begun to draw public attention. Over the past twenty years, China’s Era of Reforms brought a lot of social problems with it, and these are connected to the problem of violence. In my opinion, I think we need to confront the reasons for this violence. For example, the speed of the transformations could be seen as a form of violence. It is not a natural change, it is a revolutionary change, and it has a destructive nature. The reform has brought so many unsolved problems, and they are sometimes dealt with through tragic personal violence. For example, someone was killed in the south of Beijing the day before yesterday. Earlier someone set fire to a bus in Xiamen, and an old man shot six people dead in Shanghai. Of course violence is absolutely wrong. But, through cinema, I wish to look for the social and human reasons of

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<sup>4</sup> Original in Chinese: “享受全球逼得成果，并不能解决历史造就的时差。”

this violence. I don't believe it is simply a social thing, without any humanity.

**Mello:** Is *A Touch of Sin* going to be released in China in 2013? Is it still important for you that your films are seen on the big screen and by large audiences, rather than at home, on pirate DVDs or online?

**Jia:** It is almost certain that *A Touch of Sin* is going to be shown between late October and early November here in China, but the specific day is yet to be determined. This is because there are many films coming out in China now and we have to be closer to the date to find out exactly when it will be released.<sup>5</sup> In relation to whether it is important to have it shown on the big screen, I have just finished a short film that replies to this question. At this year's Venice Film Festival, some directors were invited to make a short film of one minute and a half to talk about the future of cinema. My point of view in this film is that, in order to talk about the future of cinema, we must talk about aesthetic feeling and tradition. So the film shows a girl who watches a film all by herself on the computer, sitting alone in an office, and she is crying. Then we see her having dinner alone in a restaurant, and as she waits for her food she watches a film on her mobile phone, which again makes her cry. Then she watches a film on her tablet in a meeting room while waiting for the meeting, and she is also crying. All these times nobody knew she was crying. In the end she and her boyfriend, along with dozens of other young people, are watching a film together on a big screen on the street, and she cries again. Her boyfriend sees her crying and she sees many others crying. I think new media tend to demassify the public by turning the viewers into one person, or two persons. I think the most important thing about cinema is the collective viewing experience, the way we share a common emotion, a common understanding, so we can affect and influence each other. This is the most attractive thing about movie theatres. And so I will always conceive my films for the big screen, for the big movie theatres.

**Mello:** Do you still have plans to open a cinema in Beijing?

**Jia:** Yes, I do, and it is in the process of being built. Then we also found a place in Shanghai to build another cinema there. We hope to be able to show some interesting films. But mostly I hope to be able to provide a venue for the public, for directors and for film critics to talk about cinema face to face. If we do not have such a place, we can only discuss films on Twitter or Weibo<sup>6</sup>, but not really talk about it. So I hope to create places for these types of discussions.

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<sup>5</sup> As of today (June 2014) *A Touch of Sin* still hasn't been released in China due to censorship issues.

<sup>6</sup> Chinese microblogging website.

**Mello:** It is true that there are not many places like this in Beijing. There's maybe MOMA...

**Jia:** I also go to MOMA quite often, but I think there should be another place like this, or more places like this, in Beijing.

**Mello:** You used to say that there are three things that were crucial to independent cinema's development in China: digital technology, piracy and the Internet. Are these elements still important today? Do you still feel that you are an independent director, and is this idea of independence still important to you?

**Jia:** I think it is very important, because in China we still have to face film censorship, as well as, since the 1990s, a very strong impact from the market economy and consumerist culture. Having to face this dual pressure, both from film censorship and from the imperatives of the market, independent cinema has on one hand faced a lot of difficulties, but on the other hand society needs more independent culture. So apart from the three points that I mentioned in the past, digital technology, piracy and the Internet, I now feel that it is very important to establish the screening of independent films. For example, on the Internet, there are a lot of independent films that can be watched, as well as a lot of information about independent films. But the viewers do not know how to choose this information. In other words, it is important to have a cinema to introduce independent film, to promote it via different activities and to attract young people to really feel the culture. Because when this culture is thrown in together with so many different things on endless websites, I found that, in fact, very few young viewers gravitated towards it. So, the question of how to introduce independent film becomes something essential. It is particularly important for people to try, to understand and to feel this culture. My own company is also trying to do this, that is, to release some films as well as to publish film research monographs. Two years ago, we also supported a documentary film festival, because these are the kinds of things that need to be done.

**Mello:** And you also produce films by newcomer directors, is that right? How do you select what projects to sponsor?

**Jia:** There are, in fact, two phases in this process. As far as I am concerned, I first read their scripts, and then from the script I decide whether or not to collaborate with them. Moreover, the directors with whom I have already worked had previously directed short films, so I could watch these films to find out if they had talent. We get in touch and begin to get to know each other on these two bases. But sometimes I also choose some projects which I think are very good and very creative. There are other projects which are really good and creative but at the same time very commercial, so I will not choose them, because the director can easily find other collaborators. I prefer those projects that are creative but that would

have more difficulties in the market, and thus the cooperation becomes quite necessary. But if the project has a strong commercial appeal, I do not see the need to sponsor it, since the director can easily find other companies to collaborate with.

**Mello:** Do you have faith in the future of cinema in China?

**Jia:** I think Chinese cinema still faces a lot of difficulties. One of the biggest problems is related to education, because basic art education, not just film education, is neglected in China. The younger generation, though they have the enthusiasm for making films, generally do not have enough basic art education. This is something that worries me a lot. But, at the same time, I think that in China there are plenty of passionate authors. There are definitely many of them, which is good.

**Mello:** And is censorship still a big problem in China?

**Jia:** Censorship is the biggest monster, and we still haven't been able to tame it. But changes in censorship must be accompanied by changes in China's political system. So ultimately, China still needs to change.

**Mello:** Do you think this is going to happen in the near future?

**Jia:** No, I do not, there is still a long way to go. In 1997, when I started making my first film, I thought it would change soon. Then around 2000, I still thought it would change soon. In 2006, I again thought it would change soon. We believe forever that it will change soon. But when we look back, thirty years have passed and nothing has changed.

**Mello:** In *Still Life* you quote Chow Yun-fat in *The Killer* (*Diexue Shuangxiong* 喋血双雄, John Woo, 1989) who says 'Our world is changing too fast. We are getting too nostalgic'. Would you say that you are also too nostalgic for this world?

**Jia:** I made *Still Life* in 2006. Seven years have passed since then. After all this time, I believe that there is no need to follow the changes of time; the most important thing is to follow yourself.

**Mello:** Thank you very much.

This interview was recorded in Beijing, in July 19, 2013.

## REFERENCES

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